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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, schools are turning to paraprofessionals to supplement the administrative and instructional functions of teachers. Because of their roots in the community, paraprofessionals are a special human resource for rural and small school districts, while permitting such districts to address the needs created by educational reforms, federal and state mandates for services, and chronic teacher shortages. Besides participating in all phases of the instructional process, paraprofessionals now are deployed in related service areas, inlcuding speech therapy, physical and occupational therapy, crisis intervention for students with behavioral and emotional problems, early intervention and preschool programs, and case management. Meanwhile, the teacher role has evolved to include the function of manager of multiple human resources such as paraprofessionals and volunteers. Confusion over the roles and functions of paraprofessionals who work alongside teachers can be avoided through well constructed job descriptions, while retention of skilled staff can be enhanced by the development of career ladders that specify structured procedures for paraprofessionals' career mobility. Systematic training for paraprofessionals should combine on-the-job coaching with formal inservice training sessions. In addition, school districts should collaborate with colleges to design preservice and inservice training programs and to develop mechanisms that would smooth the transition of paraprofessionals into teacher education programs. (SV)

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PARAPROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION: PERSONNEL PRACTICES THAT INFLUENCE THEIR PERFORMANCE, TRAINING NEEDS, AND RETENTION

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Framing the Issues

Over the last decade a number of events and trends have occurred that have caused policy makers in both rural and urban school districts to turn to paraprofessional personnel to supplement the programmatic and administrative functions of the professional workforce. They include: 1) the current wave of education reform designed to restructure and improve the quality of all education systems and practices; 2) the move to unify and fully integrate general and special education systems; 3) the passage of federal and state legislation requiring school districts to provide individualized educational and vocational services to previously underserved categories of students ranging from infants, young children to teenagers and young adults with special needs; 4) the increased demands for services for students with diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds; and 5) chronic shortages of teachers and other professional support staff (Pickett, 1989).

As policy makers in rural and small school districts have sought alternative strategies for addressing the needs created by these factors, paraprofessional personnel have provided them with a special human resource because of a combination of characteristics that many share. Because their roots are in the community, paraprofessional staff are aware of and accept the various pressures that are directly attributable to living in rural areas. They also have an understanding of local idiosyncracies ranging from fiscal problems to philosophies of service delivery based on their knowledge of local traditions and cultural heritage (Pickett, 1989 and Kaplan, 1980).

Perhaps the most significant reason that has led to the expanded use of paraprofessionals, in all demographic and geographic areas of the country, are the efforts to redefine the roles of teachers and to involve them more directly in deciding how best to allocate human and fiscal resources and to deliver instructional services. Indeed, teachers are no longer viewed as "the sole authoritative providers of information to large groups of students." Instead they serve as frontline supervisors who are "classroom managers/orchestrators/ and facilitators of student programs and learning" (Pickett, 1989).

The Changing Roles of Paraprofessionals

The roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals have changed dramatically since the 1950s when they were first introduced into the classrooms as teacher aides. Initially, they performed clerical, housekeeping and monitoring

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chores, as a means of freeing teachers from these routine tasks and enabling them to spend more time teaching. The paraprofessional movement gained momentum throughout the 1960s and 70s, when administrators turned to this new category of workers to: serve as liaisons between the schools and community to bridge a growing lack of confidence between the consumers of educational services and service providers; and assist teachers by reviewing and reinforcing lessons with small groups of students. In only three decades, paraprofessionals have become technicians and specialists who are integral members of the instructional team and might more aptly be described as "para-educators", just as their counterparts in law and medicine are designated as paralegals and paramedics (Pickett, 1989).

The definition of the term paraprofessional used in this paper was developed by the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals in Special Education and Related Services. A paraprofessional is an employee: 1) whose position is either instructional in nature or who delivers other direct and indirect services to students and/or their parents; and 2) who works under the supervision of a teacher or another professional staff member who is responsible for the overall conduct of the class, the design and implementation of individualized education programs, and the assessment of the effect of the programs on student progress.

The Changing Roles of Teachers

Instructional and administrative duties for teachers have evolved over the last several years no matter whether they work in general, compensatory or special education. However, the federal and state laws requiring individualized programs for students with disabilities have caused the changes to occur more rapidly and become more readily identifiable in special education. Analyses of the daily activities carried out by special education teachers finds that a major portion of their time is spent on program management and supervisory tasks. As part of their program management duties they:

- coordinate and manage the information provided by the interdisciplinary teams responsible for developing the IEP;
- assess the developmental and performance levels of individual students;
- design and implement the programs to fulfill the IEP;
- develop behavior management and maintenance strategies;
- assess the impact of the teaching; and
- revise the programs based on student progress.

In addition to these programmatic duties, teachers are increasingly becoming frontline managers. They:

- plan and schedule the activities of paraprofessionals and other ancillary staff;

- they direct the work of paraprofessionals, peer tutors and other volunteers;

- assess the performance and productivity of paraprofessionals; and

- develop and implement on-the-job coaching procedures to improve the skills of paraprofessionals as well as voluteer staff (Pickett, 1989).

The Expanding Duties of Paraprofessionals

Like those of their professional colleagues, the roles and responsibilities of paraprofessionals are in transition and are becoming more intricate and demanding. While they run audio-visual equipment, assist teachers with routine recordkeeping, monitor playgrounds and lunchrooms, and assist on school buses, their roles are no longer viewed as being primarily clerical. Instead they now participate in all phases of the instructional process. They support the programmatic and classroom management functions of teachers or other education professionals by:

- tutoring individual and small groups of students;

- task analyzing instructional objectives established by the teacher;

- administering and scoring informal assessment instruments;

- observing, recording and charting student behaviors;

- implementing behavior management programs developed by the teacher, and more (Vasa and Steckleberg, 1988; Pickett, 1988; Heller and Pickett, 1981; White et al, 1980; Semrau et al, 1980).

Beyond the work paraprofessionals perform in traditional classroom settings, policy makers in rural areas are also beginning to employ them as members of crisis intervention teams for students with behavioral disorders and to serve as assistants to physical, occupational and speech therapists. Increasingly districts are utilizing them as job coaches in secondary vocational and transitional services where they train students and monitor off campus programs designed to prepare students for community living. Further, paraprofessionals are members of the multi-disciplinary teams responsible for early intervention and preschool programs. And as districts move toward the integration of general and special education, paraprofessionals are assisting students who are ready to participate in less restrictive environments. Further, in rural districts where students spend long hours on buses, paraprofessionals provide individualized tutoring services to students with special needs while they are in transit.

The Need for Improved Personnel Practices and Administrative Procedures

Paraprofessionals are not "mini-teachers". Although teachers and paraprofessionals perform some tasks that overlap, particularly in technical skill areas, e.g. observing, recording and charting data, providing direct instruction, implementing behavior management programs, it is the professional staff

member who is responsible for assessing the functioning levels of students and prescribing the programs that will meet these needs. The role of the paraprofessional is to work alongside the teacher and to implement the programs and carry out other tasks that are planned and assigned by the teacher.

While paraprofessionals support and extend the programmatic and administrative functions of teachers in myriad ways, placing them in the classroom is not necessarily a panacea. In fact, additional problems can be created if their duties are not clearly defined, if lines of authority in the classroom are not delineated, if they are not closely monitored and supervised, and if their performance is not systematicly evaluated. It is, therefore, critical for local school districts to establish differentiated staffing arrangements that delineate the roles and responsibilities of teachers and paraprofessionals.

Job Descriptions

The value and importance of functional job descriptions cannot be overstated. Effective well constructed job descriptions serve as the foundation for the development of cohesive plans and procedures for hiring, deploying, managing, training and maintaining skilled paraprofessionals.

The key to the development of job descriptions and differentiated staffing arrangements must begin with an in-depth analysis of the functions that take place in classrooms and related services programs. In general the activities/

tasks fall into two operational categories: The first is program planning and implementation (assessment, diagnosis, prescription and direct intervention). The second is classroom management (organization, supervision and evaluation of support personnel, material development and maintenance, record keeping).

Using the results of a task analysis or a similar procedure, personnel at the district and building level will be able to develop job descriptions that define the relationship between teachers and paraprofessionals including the distinctions in their roles and responsibilities and areas where they may perform the same or similar tasks.

Specific information that will be available to administrators, teachers and paraprofessionals through the various elements contained in a functional job description are:

- duties the paraprofessional will be responsible for;
- skills and knowledge paraprofessionals require to perform their assigned duties;
- experiential and educational requirements for a specific paraprofessional position;
- criteria for advancement to another position on a career ladder for paraprofessionals;

- a statement of who supervises the day to day work of the paraprofessional; and

- standards for evaluating the on-the-job performance.

Career Ladders

In most school districts, developing structured procedures for career mobility for paraprofessionals is not a high priority item on the list of personnel practices that need to be addressed. And yet, the work of the National Resource Center for Paraprofessionals over the last decade, reveals that the primary reason skilled paraprofessionals choose to leave the field is to seek employment in other job markets that offer higher salaries and/or opportunities for career advancement.

A career ladder approach to staff mobility has recognizable advantages for both the employee and employer:

- Career ladders with multiple points of entry and standards for upward mobility through separate and discreet levels enable personnel to: a) enter the system in positions for which they have the appropriate skills and knowledge base; b) end their career advancement based on personal goals and job preference; and c) know where they can realistically expect to go in the organizational framework of the district.

- Career ladders enable the district to provide a higher quality of services by providing a mechanism to facilitate the retention of a cadre of skilled support staff and to reduce costs associated with recruiting and training new staff. Further, they offer the district an opportunity to identifyf and encourage talented paraprofessionals to enter teacher education programs as one way to alleviate chronic shortfalls in the various categories of certified staff.

Development of viable career ladders for paraprofessional personnel can be achieved by reviewing the results of the Task (Job) Analysis and:

- dividing operational functions into multiple independently definable activities; and then

- assigning the activities to either professional or paraprofessional positions depending on the complexity of the task and the level of skills and knowledge required to perform the task.

Training

In order to improve all facets of the educational process, all members of the instructional team must be prepared to assume the duties they are expected to perform - including paraprofessionals. Over the last decade, private and public agencies have focused considerable attention on the need to increase the competency and productivity of teachers. However, little has been done to develop systems and techniques that will improve the skills of the paraprofes-

sional workforce. The overwhelming majority of paraprofessionals providing direct services to students with special needs receive limited, if any, training.

The major tasks that must be addressed by administrators in order to develop a comprehensive plan of career development for paraprofessionals include a) developing a process and content that are relevant to the identified training needs of the paraprofessionals employed by the district; b) insuring that training activities and strategies are selected that recognize the unique characteristics of adult learners; and c) developing permanent mechanisms for delivering the different components of a district wide training program.

There are various strategies staff developers may utilize to provide paraprofessionals with the knowledge and skills they require. To be effective, all of the elements should be interrelated and combine structured on-the-job coaching with formal inservice training sessions:

- On-the-job coaching is a staff development tool that is often overlooked by trainers and supervisory personnel in all provider agencies. In rural systems, it is a benefical process because it employs the expertise of teachers and other professional personnel to provide individual paraprofessionals with the basic skills required to perform their job. The purpose of on-the-job training is to provide paraprofessionals a chance to practice the skills and to receive constructive feedback from the teacher or another designated supervisor.

- Structured in-service training sessions should supplement the training paraprofessionals receive on-the-job. This phase of the training should offer paraprofessionals an opportunity to gain information about the rights of students with disabilities, to develop legal, ethical, communication and problem solving skills that will improve their performance as members of the team, and to become familiar with the safety and emergency procedures established by the district. Further, this training should enable paraprofessionals to learn and master more complex skills required to advance to another position on a career ladder.

The Roles of Institutions of Higher Education

The need to recruit and retain skilled committed teachers and other professional support staff to work in small rural schools is well documented. Yet paraprofessionals whose roots are in these areas are all too often overlooked as a potential resource by teacher education programs. Developing, implementing and maintaining comprehensive systems of career development is not an easy task for any school system. By developing collaborative efforts among state and local school districts, community colleges and teacher education programs and using the expertise and resources available through the different jurisdictions, several benefits can be gained:

- School districts will have access to assistance in designing and conducting pre and inservice training programs for paraprofes-

sionals to prepare them to take on more complex demanding roles e.g. speech, occupational, and physical therapy assistants, job coaches, and assistant teachers in preschool programs.

- Paraprofessionals will have access to post secondary education programs designed to meet their individual needs and to more readily achieve professional status if that is their personal goal.

- Curriculum designers in two and four year colleges will have greater access to information that will enable them to revise their curricula to prepare their graduates (whether professional or paraprofessional) to assume their assigned tasks.

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